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The Honduran Armed Forces: Military Capabilities and Political Role

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An Intelligence Assessment

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An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 30 September 1981
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

The author of this paper is [] Middle
America Caribbean Division, Central American
Working Group. Comments and queries are wel-
come and may be directed to the Chief, Central
American Working Group, OALA, []

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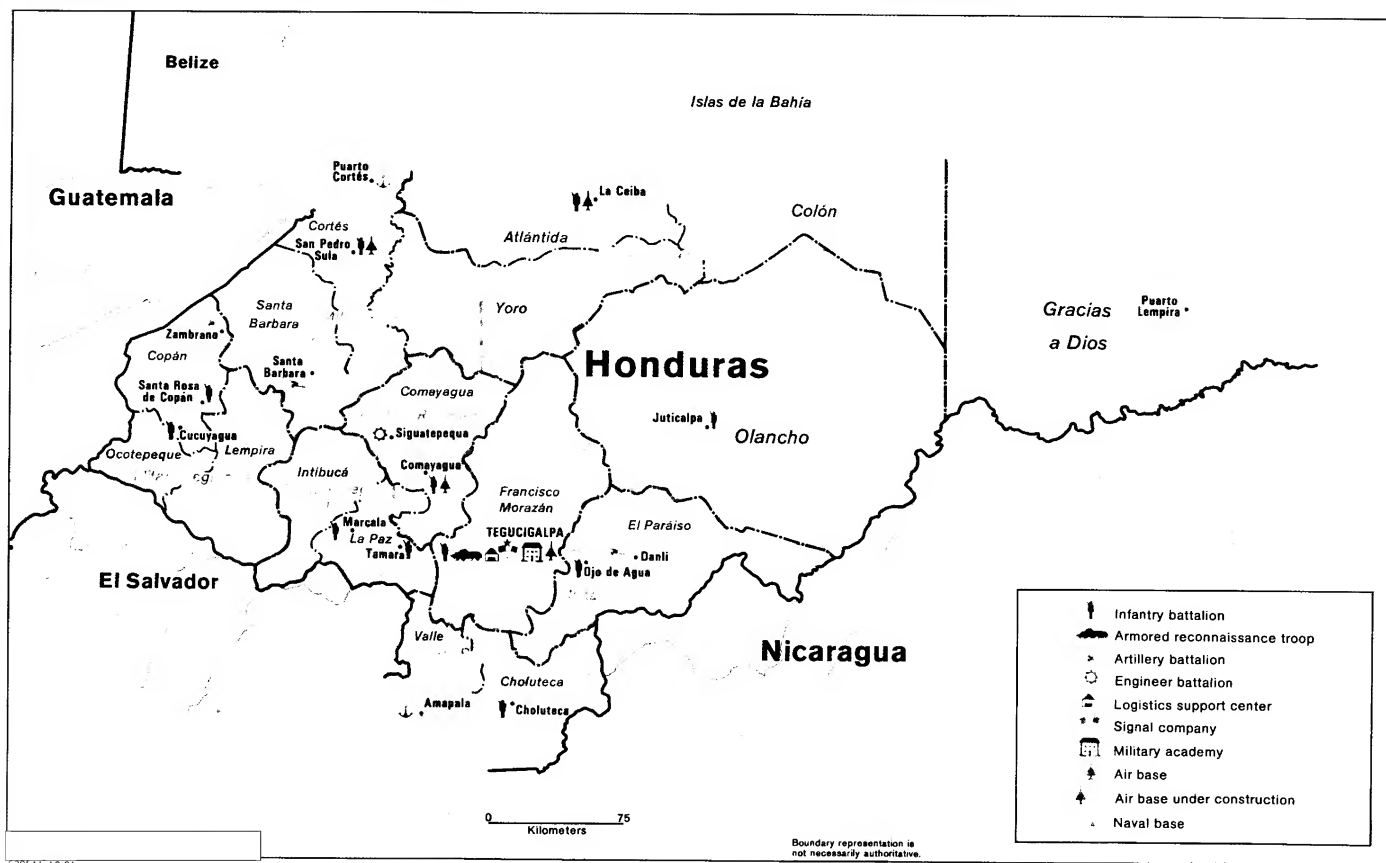
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It was coordinated with the Office of Soviet Analysis,
Office of East Asian Analysis, Office of Near East-
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Operations. []

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**The Honduran Armed Forces:
Military Capabilities
and Political Role**

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Key Judgments

Buffeted by regional trends of growing violence, leftist militancy, and deteriorating economic conditions, Honduras may face a serious, externally supported insurgency as well as chronic political and social instability within two or three years. Honduran leftists—assisted by Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Bloc—have stepped up their activities and are preparing for armed struggle.

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Nicaragua's military buildup and hostile attitude toward Honduras have increased the possibility of an armed conflict between the two countries. With the aid of Cuban and Soviet advisers and weapons, Nicaragua has built up Central America's largest armed forces. Nicaragua already outstrips Honduras in armor, artillery, and ground mobility, and probably will achieve air superiority within the next year.

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Alarmed by the unsettled regional outlook and rising leftist activity at home, the Honduran military is cracking down on the domestic left and collaborating increasingly with the Salvadoran and Guatemalan armed forces. Tegucigalpa also is seeking to enhance its combat capability—particularly along the Nicaraguan border.

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The Honduran armed forces are capable of containing low to moderate levels of insurgency or small-scale cross-border incursions from a neighboring country. Without help, however, the military would not be able to suppress a serious, externally supported insurgency or withstand a full-scale invasion from Nicaragua.

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Dissatisfied with recent levels and terms of US military assistance, the Honduran high command nonetheless remains pro-US and looks to the United States for diplomatic and material support. As long as large-scale assistance appears probable, the military will be receptive to Washington's counsel.

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After nine years of direct rule, the officer corps is preparing to surrender power to civilians following elections in November. The military has only a superficial commitment to civilian rule, however, and will be inclined to intervene if the politicians fail to cope with the country's serious problems or meddle in military affairs. [REDACTED]

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The new civilian president is unlikely to provide strong leadership in either economic or security matters. Moreover, deteriorating economic conditions probably will cut back on available funds for existing programs of social services and generally enhance the climate for insurgency. Under these circumstances, the armed forces are likely to resort increasingly to repression to keep the left from exploiting the situation. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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A return to military rule would complicate efforts to resolve the country's growing problems by stimulating leftist violence, contributing to a polarization of society, and hampering attempts to secure foreign aid and investments. The military's best hope of surviving the threats of rising leftist militancy and an increasingly hostile Nicaragua lies in cooperating with the civilian politicians it distrusts while improving its own capabilities.

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The Honduran Armed Forces: Military Capabilities and Political Role

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Honduras is in no immediate danger of destabilization, but it is being affected severely by regional trends of growing violence, leftist militancy, and deteriorating economic conditions. Unless these tendencies are reversed, Honduras may face a serious, externally supported insurgency, as well as chronic political and social instability within two or three years. In addition, an increasingly hostile Marxist regime in Managua has increased the possibility of an armed conflict with Nicaragua.

The Honduran armed forces—with ground forces of only 12,000 men, outdated weapons inventories, inadequate logistics capability, and poor training—are ill-prepared to cope with these adverse regional trends. Although the Honduran Air Force has long been considered the best in Central America, it lacks adequate firepower and mobility to support a large-scale counterinsurgency effort, and, moreover, will likely soon be inferior to Nicaragua's air arm.

The Honduran military is capable of containing low to moderate levels of insurgency as well as small-scale cross-border incursions by any of the country's three neighbors. The armed forces probably would be unable to suppress a serious domestic insurgency supported from Nicaragua and Cuba, however, without large-scale military assistance from the United States. Moreover, as Nicaragua's military buildup progresses, Tegucigalpa will be increasingly vulnerable to invasion.

Alarmed by these challenges, the Honduran armed forces during the past two years have changed strategy. Internal security is now emphasized over defense against invasion from neighboring countries, and Nicaragua has replaced El Salvador as the perceived external enemy. The military is seeking to enhance counterinsurgency training, improve intelligence collection, and upgrade equipment inventories. Unhappy

with recent levels of US military assistance, Tegucigalpa intends to press Washington to provide training and hardware on concessional terms.

The armed forces—which, except for an 18-month period in the early 1970s, have ruled Honduras since 1963—are preparing to cede power to a freely elected civilian regime early next year. By doing so, the officer corps intends to concentrate on improving military capabilities and to remove itself as an easily identifiable target for the left, as the Somoza family was in Nicaragua.

Nonetheless, the military's commitment to a return to civilian rule is shaky. Fearing that civilian politicians will be unable to maintain social order or reverse the country's economic downturn, the military will be ready to seize power again. Neither of the two principal presidential candidates is likely to provide dynamic and innovative leadership, and the likelihood of military intervention will remain high.

The armed forces are open to Washington's influence. Despite some strains in relations—particularly over US military assistance—the Honduran military retains a US-style organizational structure and a pro-US orientation. The officer corps strongly believes that large-scale assistance from Washington will be essential to Honduras's ability to meet internal and external challenges. As long as such assistance appears probable, the military's political behavior will be oriented toward keeping US support.

Traditional Role

Until the 1950s, the Honduran military served the political ambitions of individual strongmen. The upgrading of the military academy, however, produced a professional officer corps with a keen sense of its own corporate interests. Since 1957, the armed forces have intervened in politics in defense of institutional concerns.

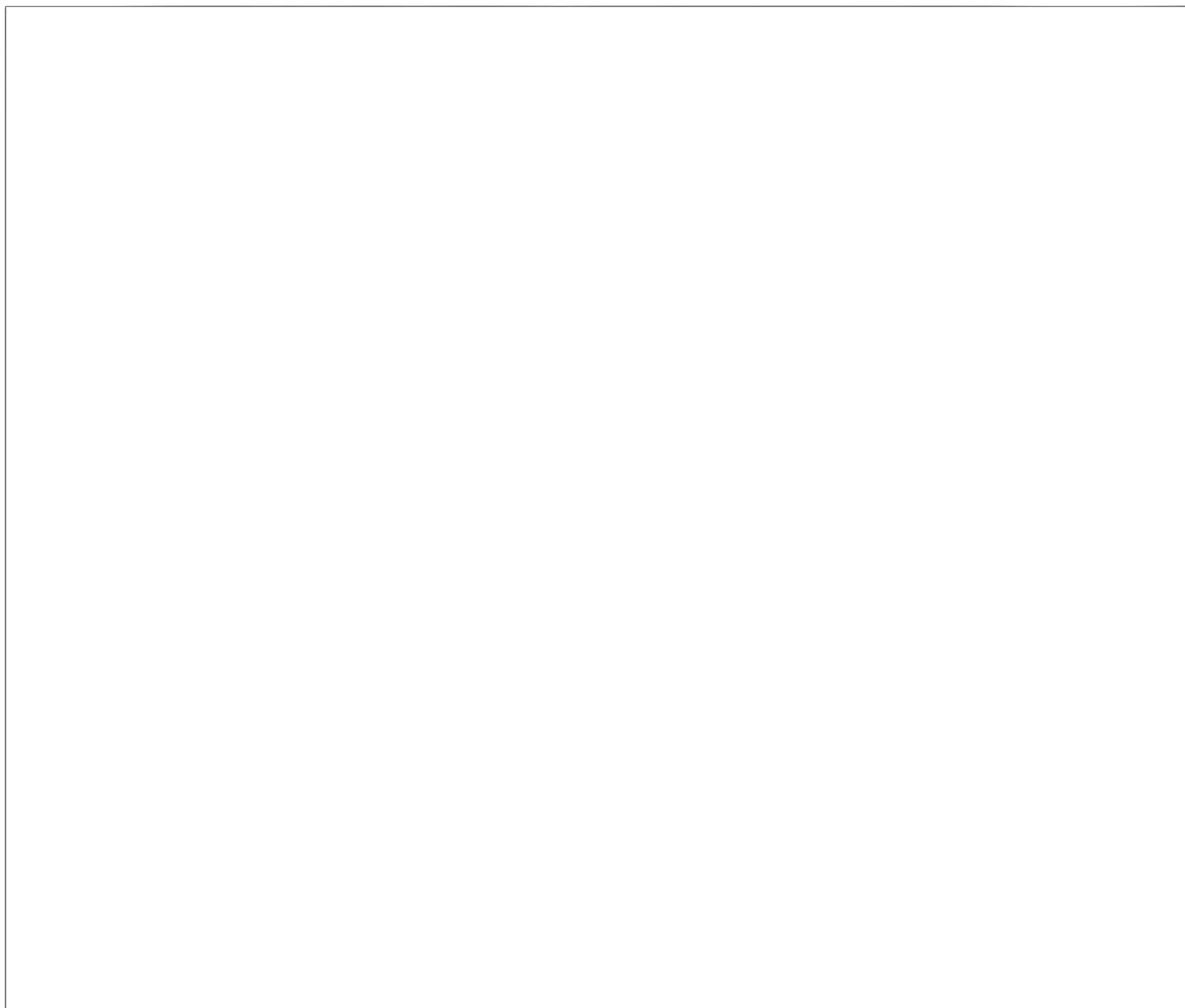
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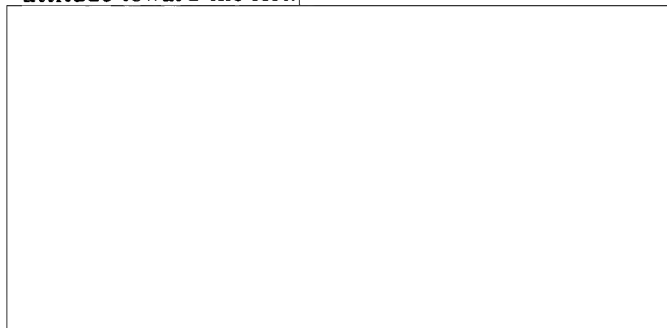
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Despite rampant corruption and occasional abuses of power, the Honduran military has not been a repressive force. Lacking a high degree of socioeconomic stratification, serious demographic pressures, a dictatorial dynasty, and a power structure rigidly opposed to change, Honduras has avoided the sharp social conflicts and political polarization experienced in recent years by Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Peaceful solution to conflict is enhanced by a free press, effective organized labor movements, and the interplay of political parties.

Within this generally nonviolent climate, the Honduran military until this year maintained a tolerant attitude toward the left.



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External defense did not pose serious problems until recently. The border war with El Salvador in 1969 stalled quickly because of inadequate resources on both sides and pressure from the Organization of American States. As a consequence of the war, the Honduran military obtained new equipment from non-US sources and attempted to enhance its combat readiness. As long as the armed forces of neighboring countries remained on a par with its own, however, Honduras had no reason to seek sophisticated weaponry or increase troop strength. [REDACTED]

This relatively calm situation is changing. The Sandinista victory in Nicaragua and the subsequent leftist surge throughout the region have generated new internal and external challenges for the Honduran military. [REDACTED]

Growing Leftist Activities

Although Honduras continues to serve largely as an arms conduit and support base for guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala, the left is building a potential for domestic insurgency. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the Moscow-line and traditionally nonviolent Communist Party of Honduras (PCH) early last year began to prepare for armed struggle. It staged several bank robberies and kidnappings to obtain funds for arms and various activities, including propaganda and labor agitation. [REDACTED]

Fear of provoking military repression, however, has induced the PCH leadership to suspend violent operations for the time being. The Communists currently are participating in a leftist electoral coalition in hopes of expanding the party's mass base, while continuing to prepare for revolutionary activity. PCH members and sympathizers numbered 1,400 three years ago, but schisms have reduced the ranks to half that number. [REDACTED]

The most active and rapidly growing leftist organization is the People's Revolutionary Union (URP), formed in mid-1980 by Communist dissidents who favored an immediate transition to armed struggle. The URP includes peasant, worker, and student

groups, and probably has over 1,000 members. Its armed wing has staged numerous bank robberies, kidnappings, building takeovers, bombings, and other violent acts, including a recent attack on US military personnel. Other leftist organizations—many of them also splinters from the Communist Party—are relatively weak and often short lived. [REDACTED]

If Honduran leftists launch a guerrilla struggle, they will have several advantages over the military. The mountainous and sparsely populated terrain offers a propitious environment for insurgency. In addition, leftists could utilize existing networks supporting Salvadoran revolutionaries, as well as links to other Central American leftists. Moreover, the country's coastline and borders are long and porous, facilitating the infiltration of arms from Nicaragua and Cuba. [REDACTED]

External Support for the Left

Cuba, Nicaragua, and the USSR—seeking to take advantage of unsettled conditions throughout Central America—already are assisting Honduran leftist organizations, while several East European countries and a radical Arab group also have promised to do so. [REDACTED]

Havana's top priorities in Central America remain to consolidate the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and to foster the Salvadoran and Guatemalan insurgencies. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] During the past few years, an estimated 100 to 150 Honduran leftists have traveled to Cuba for guerrilla training, and others have been given university scholarships and medical treatment. In addition, Havana apparently has provided limited quantities of money and weapons. [REDACTED]

The Sandinistas also assist the Honduran left, both out of revolutionary solidarity and a conviction that Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—with US backing—eventually will invade Nicaragua. [REDACTED]

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armor, artillery, and ground mobility. Radar-assisted antiaircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles probably will be deployed in the next year. Nicaragua probably will obtain Soviet-made MIG fighter aircraft during 1982. []

Honduran military leaders are disturbed by the dimensions of the Nicaraguan military buildup, the presence of 5,000 to 6,000 Cuban military and civilian advisers in Nicaragua, and Managua's burgeoning relationship with Moscow. Moreover, Sandinista aid to Honduran leftists and frequent border incidents fan Honduran fears and increase the likelihood of armed conflict between the two countries over the mid- to long term. []

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The Military's Response

Internal Security. Over the past two years, the Honduran military has undertaken to meet the new internal and external challenges—which, to the armed forces, are inextricably interwoven—by re-vamping its strategy and enhancing its combat capability. The key change has been a shift in emphasis from preparation for conventional warfare against neighboring countries to internal security, and a corresponding tougher line toward leftist activities. []

Soon after the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, the Honduran military decided to improve counterinsurgency training and acquire additional riot-control equipment; intelligence collection, anti-Communist indoctrination of the troops, and civic-action programs were other areas slated for increased attention. In addition, the armed forces established a Special Operations Squadron, which has grown from 45 to 140 members. As yet untested, this unit is intended to counter kidnappings and other actions by urban guerrillas. The 16 British Scorpion light tanks received in May—but ordered years before the Sandinistas came to power—can be used against domestic insurgents as well as foreign armies. The military also recently ordered 19 armored jeep wagons for riot control, and has requested that the United States provide crowd-control training for selected battalions in urban areas. []

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The Nicaraguan Threat

Besides the growing danger of an externally supported insurgency, the military believes Honduras to be threatened by a militaristic and potentially hostile regime in Managua. Despite some deficiencies, the Sandinista People's Army is rapidly making the transition from guerrilla bands to a professional armed force. With 19,000 to 24,000 men on active duty, Nicaragua now has Central America's largest military. Within a year or two, active-duty forces could number some 35,000 to 40,000, with an equal number in the ready reserve and a larger number in the territorial militia. []

Nicaraguan forces are well armed and well trained by Central American standards, thanks to the large influx of Soviet-made weapons and the expertise of Cuban and Soviet advisers. The Sandinista People's Army already outstrips the Honduran military in

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The elimination of leftists by government authorities is a departure from the generally nonviolent pattern of Honduran politics and promises to spawn more violence. Moreover, the disappearances earlier this year drew the attention of international human rights organizations. While welcomed by some, the continued application of summary justice to radicals may alienate other sectors of the Honduran public—particularly students and professionals—and erode international support for Tegucigalpa. In late September, several thousand Hondurans staged a demonstration in the capital to protest repression by the security forces and the emergence of death squads presumed to have official sanction. []

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[] This year, Honduran authorities have intercepted several weapons shipments from Nicaragua, discovered a number of arms caches, and broken up networks of Central American revolutionaries. The Public Security Forces—a military branch with police and investigatory functions—has dismantled several radical cells and are prepared to round up known leftists on short notice. These represent, however, only a fraction of leftist operations in Honduras, and gunrunning and other support activities continue. []

In an effort to check leftist activities, the Superior Defense Council—the military's collegial decision-making body, composed of approximately 37 top officers—last April oversaw the drafting of a National Security Act providing stiff penalties for kidnapping, skyjacking, inciting violent demonstrations, and fomenting work stoppages and strikes “without valid cause.” The Constituent Assembly, however, objects to the section on strikes and work stoppages, and has not yet passed the law. []

In the meantime, security officials—frustrated by the failure of the judicial system to punish terrorists and common criminals—have begun to reciprocate leftist violence. []

The armed forces' plans for preventing domestic insurgency do not emphasize socioeconomic reform. Indeed, deteriorating economic conditions are affecting government revenues and will necessitate cutbacks in expenditures for existing programs of social services and roadbuilding in rural areas. Land reform—one of the most pressing social issues in Honduras—has stagnated since 1978 and is not likely to accelerate significantly in the near term. Conscious of the probable impact of these trends on political stability, the military is likely to resort increasingly to repression to keep the left from exploiting the situation. []

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External Defense. Increasingly preoccupied with Managua's military buildup and radical bent, the officer corps on several occasions has discussed launching a preemptive airstrike on Nicaragua, despite its limited ability to carry out the operation successfully. Such action is highly unlikely, however, without some signal of approval from the United States. Instead, Honduran strategy toward Nicaragua 25X1 calls for modernization of the armed forces, close collaboration with El Salvador and Guatemala, and support for anti-Sandinista exile groups. []

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Honduras is strengthening its forces near the Nicaraguan border. The Third Artillery Battalion was transferred to Danli earlier this year, and a new infantry battalion is to be formed and deployed in the near future near Puerto Lempira.

The Honduran armed forces are cooperating increasingly with Salvadoran and Guatemalan military leaders, who agree that Nicaragua is a common enemy. Tegucigalpa and San Salvador last year signed a treaty ending 12 years of official belligerency. Honduras also has collaborated with El Salvador by staging blocking operations along the border during antiguerrilla sweeps by the Salvadorans, by allowing the Salvadoran military to pursue insurgents into disputed frontier areas, and by stepping up efforts to interdict arms shipments by land and sea from Nicaragua. The Hondurans have killed or captured a number of Salvadoran insurgents while patrolling the border, and in mid-August began to turn over to the Salvadoran military any refugees suspected of links to the guerrillas.



Meanwhile, Argentina and Chile are encouraging such cooperation as a counterweight to Nicaragua's growing power. Honduras is consulting with those countries and Venezuela to line up additional support to prepare for the eventuality of conflict with Managua.

Lingering suspicions and domestic political considerations, however, constitute obstacles to the budding military alliance in Central America's northern tier. Remembering El Salvador's invasion in 1969, Tegucigalpa fears a future conflict with Guatemala or El

Salvador if the Nicaraguan danger eventually passes. Moreover, the Honduran armed forces believe that close association with the Salvadoran and Guatemalan counterinsurgency campaigns may entail political costs and stimulate leftist activities at home.

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Vulnerabilities

At present, the Honduran armed forces are capable of containing low to moderate levels of insurgency, as well as small-scale cross-border incursions by any of the country's three neighbors. The military probably would be unable to suppress a serious domestic insurgency supported from Nicaragua and Cuba, however, without large-scale assistance from the United States. Moreover, Tegucigalpa will be increasingly vulnerable to invasion as Nicaragua's military buildup continues. If leftist guerrillas come to power in El Salvador, Honduras will face even greater external pressure.

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The Honduran armed forces have a number of serious weaknesses:

- Soldiers are mostly conscripts with little motivation and low morale. Training is poor, and between 60 and 70 percent leave the service after two years. Ground force units are widely dispersed and generally undermanned. Only six of the 11 infantry battalions are combat ready. 25X1
- Ground mobility is severely limited. Most of the Army's trucks are kept at the central maintenance facilities in Tegucigalpa, leaving each battalion with only five or six transport vehicles. Maintenance is poor. 25X1
- Only one of the three artillery battalions is combat ready. It relies primarily on eight obsolescent, Spanish-made 105-mm howitzers. There is no joint artillery/infantry training. 25X1
- Although the Honduran Air Force long has been considered the best in Central America, the lack of air-intercept and ground-control radar severely restricts the air defense role of its 15 Super Mysteres. Along with five A-37s, the Mysteres potentially can furnish ground support, but, despite recent improvement, air-to-ground coordination remains poor.

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- Air mobility is limited. The Air Force has two medium and 20 light fixed-wing transports, as well as 17 transport helicopters—10 of them UH-1Hs leased from the United States. Another four helicopters have been purchased but not yet delivered.
- The Navy—actually no more than a small coastal force—numbers less than 400 men, few of them with formal naval training. The eight patrol boats, responsible for covering the Gulf of Fonseca and the extensive north coast, are in need of major overhaul and carry no radar or heavy armament. Air-to-sea coordination is virtually nonexistent.
- Communications equipment and training are outdated and unsophisticated.
- No real border patrol—with air reconnaissance and mobile units—exists. Despite a few successes, the military has a very limited capability to interdict the infiltration of arms and personnel.
- The Army has no effective means of calling up the reserve; in a recent callup drill, only 20 percent responded. []

Military Needs

The Honduran military estimates that it needs more than \$8 million just for munitions and other war reserves, spare parts, and individual field gear; modernizing and standardizing weapons and obtaining more sophisticated equipment will cost substantially more. Tegucigalpa is counting on large-scale US assistance on concessional terms to modernize its weaponry and training. []

To improve counterinsurgency capabilities—as well as the ability to interdict arms shipments from Nicaragua and Cuba—the Honduran military will need:

- Helicopter gunships.
- Patrol boats.
- Radar and communications equipment.
- Ground transport vehicles.
- Reorganization of transportation services.
- Upgrading and standardization of basic infantry weapons.

- Training in counterinsurgency, small-unit tactics, communications, intelligence, air-to-ground coordination, and aircraft and vehicle maintenance.
- Continued sharing of intelligence. []

Enhancing the military's ability to fight a conventional war with Nicaragua will require additional improvements. For example, Honduras will need major weapons deliveries, including replacement of the Air Force's aging Super Mysteres with F-5s or comparable fighters and artillery and antitank missiles to offset Nicaragua's growing armor and artillery inventories. The military also will need better training in basic infantry skills and in the use and maintenance of new systems. []

The Hondurans expect the United States to furnish virtually all of the new equipment and training. Given the country's limited resources—the total 1981 military budget, including hidden allocations, amounts only to about \$62 million—assistance would have to be rendered on concessional terms. The Honduran military leadership is extremely unhappy with past levels, costs, and delays of US military aid, and plan to ask Washington for a substantial increase to help Honduras face the danger from Nicaragua and compensate for recent US assistance to its old adversary, El Salvador. []

Tegucigalpa also is seeking aid from other sources. The armed forces are examining recent Chilean, Argentine, and French offers to supply weapons and ammunition on generous terms. Honduras already has sent several dozen officers to Argentina for training and may receive some military assistance from Venezuela. These countries, however, are unlikely to furnish more than a fraction of the necessary training and materiel. []

The Officer Corps

The officer corps is relatively professional by Central American standards and has a strong institutional identity. Cohesiveness is fostered by similar social origins—most officers are from the urban middle class—and the collegial decisionmaking process of the Superior Defense Council. The 19 members of the

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second graduating class (1961) of the Francisco Morazan Military Academy, most of whom hold the rank of colonel, dominate the Council, which is guided by a "strategy committee" of four to seven colonels. []

The dominant clique attempts to avoid divisiveness by keeping rivals on the payroll in unimportant jobs or by setting them up in bureaucratic posts or commercial enterprises. Midlevel officers are mollified with promotions and command assignments. Over the past two years, the dominant group has managed to dampen traditional rivalries between the Army and Air Force. []

Ideological differences are relatively minor. There is no truly reformist clique. Most officers are anti-Communists, but some are more pragmatic than others in dealing with the left. []

Corruption among military officials has reached unprecedented levels, and has become a public issue. Many members of the Superior Defense Council are notorious for having used their positions for personal enrichment. Besides demanding kickbacks from businessmen, some officers have been implicated in drug trafficking, and a few may be involved in gunrunning as well; corruption is thus likely to hinder arms-interdiction efforts. Some junior officers reportedly are unhappy over the extent of corruption among their seniors—although they probably only want a larger share for themselves. []

Transition to Civilian Rule

Except for an 18-month period in 1971-72, the Armed Forces have ruled Honduras since 1963, generally in close association with the National Party. For most of that time, the military manipulated elections, proscribed left-of-center parties, and engaged in flagrant corruption. Generals were ousted from the presidency by their fellow officers in 1975 and 1978 after their administrations had been rocked by scandal. On the positive side, the economic programs of the military governments—emphasizing export diversification and the development of infrastructure, particularly roads and hydroelectric power—yielded impressive results during the 1970s. []

Two years ago, the military decided to cede power to a freely elected civilian administration. The decision was motivated by several considerations: 25X1

- Alarmed by the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua and the worsening insurgency in El Salvador, the officer corps wished to concentrate on external defense and internal security. 25X1
- The United States was pressing the military to withdraw from politics. 25X1
- Domestic pressures had built up because of corruption and the political parties' desire to exercise power; a restoration of civilian rule would ease these pressures and avoid giving the left an easy target, as the Somoza family became in Nicaragua. []

The National and Liberal Parties are the principal 25X1
contenders for control of the new administration. The Nationals—led by party boss and presidential candidate Ricardo Zuniga []

[] are the more conservative. 25X6
Founded by a soldier-president in the 1940s, the 25X6
National Party has relied on its long and close
relationship with the officer corps to reap the spoils of
military government. [] 25X1

The centrist Liberals, who generally have been out of power during the past two decades, are headed by Roberto Suazo, a relatively honest but ineffective 25X1
leader who is the party's standard bearer in the
presidential elections in November. Suazo's control of
the party has been challenged unsuccessfully by two
factions: the left-leaning Popular Liberal Alliance and
the less important Liberal Unity Front. []

Two small parties on the center left draw their 25X1
membership primarily from the professional classes.
The Innovation and Unity Party, which the military
prevented from registering as a legal party for almost
10 years, participated in elections for the first time
last year. The other party, the Christian Democrats,
also has been legalized after a long period of proscription.
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On the far left are the Socialist and Communist Parties and a Communist splinter group, which have joined in an electoral alliance called the Honduran Patriotic Front. Other leftist organizations oppose participation in elections and promote violent revolution. [redacted]

Role in the Transition

To avert political instability or radical transformations, and to protect institutional interests, the mili-

tary leadership has insisted that the transition be carefully directed. [redacted]

Originally, the military apparently intended—in time-honored tradition—to rig the elections in favor of the National Party. Pressed by Washington, however, the armed forces pledged neutrality on the eve of elections for a Constituent Assembly in April of last year. Contrary to most predictions, the Liberals won a narrow victory. [redacted]

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After often acrimonious negotiations, the Superior Defense Council and the Liberals agreed on the Assembly's powers and on the makeup of a provisional government headed by General Paz. Cabinet positions were shared among the Liberals, the Nationals, the Innovation and Unity Party, and the military. Following the early disagreements, the military and the Liberals established regular channels of communication and have sought to avoid conflict. []

During the past year, the Constituent Assembly, in consultation with the Superior Defense Council, has been drafting a new Constitution that will be promulgated this fall. Presidential and congressional elections are scheduled for late November, and the new administration will take office in January. The Liberals are expected to win the presidency as well as a plurality in the unicameral legislature. Some sort of coalition government seems inevitable, however, since proportional representation makes it highly unlikely that any party can win an outright majority []

The new administration will find the going difficult. Neither Suazo—the likely winner—nor Zuniga is apt to capture the public's imagination or provide dynamic leadership. Holding a fractious coalition together will prove next to impossible, and the civilian government will appear ineffectual. []

The rapidly deteriorating economy will make the new administration's task all the harder. Little or no growth is expected before mid-1982 at the earliest as Honduras continues to face high energy costs, stagnant export earnings, and weak investor confidence. A recently approved International Monetary Fund credit is contingent on an austerity budget that will cut expenditures for social services and hold down wage increases. These moves, in turn, are likely to fan labor strife and general unrest. []

Future Role

Bent on protecting its interests, the military will continue to occupy the key position in domestic politics. The Superior Defense Council, established during the 1970s to coordinate the actions of the military government, will survive the transition to civilian rule. Representing the collective will of the

officer corps, the Council will continue to consider political as well as military matters and seek to influence a broad range of national policy issues. []

The place of the armed forces in the new Constitution has been the subject of negotiations between the Council and the Liberal leadership over the past 17 months. The military has agreed that the Congress will choose the Armed Forces Commander from a list of candidates prepared by the Council, and has accepted some controls on the military budget. In return, the Council has demanded that the Constitution reaffirm the autonomy of the armed forces, that the President respect the chain of command, and that the Council be consulted on pending legislation with national security or defense implications. The military also quashed a suggestion that the Public Security Forces be transferred to civilian control. []

Given the weakness of political institutions, the civilian government will be forced to make concessions in order to obtain military backing for key decisions. Last April, Liberal presidential candidate Suazo promised his party's support for an increased military budget and for plans to modernize the armed forces in return for the Council's pledge to remain neutral during the elections and to support whichever party wins. Such horse trading probably will continue. Moreover, in the event of policy differences, the Council will try to influence the administration by calling in top officials for consultations. []

Specific policies will depend in part on who heads the armed forces. []

[] Paz is maneuvering to retain the post of Armed Forces Commander when he surrenders the presidency in January, but the Superior Defense Council already has selected Col. Gustavo Alvarez as his successor—a choice still to be ratified by Congress. []

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Alvarez is an energetic and capable officer who has been groomed for the job in a series of important posts. He plans to consolidate his authority by making personnel changes after assuming command, but must move cautiously to maintain the Council's backing. A hardliner, Alvarez is likely to press for a tough policy toward the left and to be impatient with weakness or mismanagement on the part of the civilian administration. He is pushing ahead with a plan to replace the Public Security Forces—purged of corrupt and inept officials—with a new organization called the Military Police. [REDACTED]

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Prospects for a Coup

The potential for a return to military rule will remain high. Generally considering civilian politicians incompetent, ideologically suspect, and responsive to parochial rather than national interests, the colonels will follow the course of the new administration with some misgiving. [REDACTED]

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The civilians are unlikely to court intervention by tampering with military prerogatives. The armed forces almost certainly will oust any government that tries to interfere with the chain of command, make sharp cuts in the military budget, or discipline high-ranking officers for corruption. [REDACTED]

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Other issues partially beyond the administration's control, however, also may lead the military toward intervention. Inability to resolve the country's economic problems, for example, will reinforce the military's doubts about the fitness of civilian politicians to govern. [REDACTED]

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More importantly, the administration may be unable to provide full support for the armed forces' antileftist campaign or to maintain social and political stability. To protect its left flank, the administration may take a tolerant attitude toward labor strikes and peasant land invasions—sources of increasing concern to the military. Moreover, the military fears the influence of certain Liberal politicians—including some of Suazo's advisers—whom the military considers Marxists and pro-Sandinistas. [REDACTED]

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Moreover, some sectors might welcome the military's return to power. Although Hondurans generally have a negative perception of the military because of its corruption, they recognize that the armed forces have not been a repressive institution. The middle class is increasingly disquieted by labor agitation, leftist activities, and the prospects of growing violence. If the civilian administration proves incapable of preserving order and reversing the nation's economic downturn, segments of the upper and middle classes may come to view the armed forces as the last bastion of stability and call for a coup. [REDACTED]

Some officers already are grumbling that the return to civilian rule now seems a mistake, considering Nicaragua's military buildup and leftist gains elsewhere in Central America. The Superior Defense Council fears, however, that postponing the elections might stimulate leftist insurgency or even touch off a civil war. Thus, the military probably will give the civilians their chance, while remaining ready to step in if they fail. [REDACTED]

Unlike the Guatemalan armed forces, which have greater resources, the Honduran military does not want to jeopardize US support and therefore will be responsive—within limits—to Washington's wishes. If the United States matches its demands that the civilian administration continue in office with promises of substantial aid, the military probably will oblige. [REDACTED]

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In the event of extreme political and economic deterioration, the military probably will oust the civilian administration regardless of US wishes. Given the officer corps' fears—shared by some sectors of the public—that the left will exploit any opportunities, the armed forces are more likely to risk popular outcry and condemnation by other governments than to tolerate prolonged turmoil. [REDACTED]

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A reversion to military rule will not resolve Honduras's dilemma. A decision by the armed forces to postpone elections or overthrow the newly elected government would spark increased violence by the extreme left and contribute to political polarization. Such a move also would cost Honduras international prestige and could hamper efforts to secure foreign aid and investments. The military's best hope of surviving the threats of rising leftist militancy and an increasingly hostile Nicaragua, therefore, lies in cooperating with the civilian politicians it distrusts while improving its own capabilities. [REDACTED]

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Honduran Armed Forces

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Personnel

The estimated strength of Honduran ground forces is 12,000—including 900 commissioned and 2,000 non-commissioned officers—distributed among 11 infantry, three artillery, and one engineering battalions, as well as several other units. All units are undermanned. Most enlisted men are dragooned into service. []

The Air Force has 109 officers—including 52 pilots—and approximately 900 enlisted men. An additional 350 persons in civil aviation constitute a potential reserve. []

The Navy, established as a separate service in 1976, numbers 340 men and 40 officers, almost all drawn from the Army. [] 25X1

The Public Security Forces—a military branch charged with police and intelligence functions—have an approximate strength of 3,500 but only limited combat capability. []

By law, all males between the ages of 18 and 55 are considered reservists. There is no reserve training, however, and callup procedures are ineffective. []

Training

Most officers study at the Francisco Morazan Military Academy in Tegucigalpa; a few graduate from military schools in the United States, Guatemala, Panama, Venezuela, Argentina, and Spain. The Academy's four-year curriculum was reduced to three years during the late 1970s. []

Under the control of the Honduran Army, the Academy is staffed by approximately 20 active-duty officers, who teach military subjects and administer the institution. Professors from the National Autonomous University of Honduras offer courses in nonmilitary topics. Believing, however, that the professors inject political opinions and often have a Marxist slant, the

Superior Defense Council has decided to terminate the contract with the university at the end of the training year in November 1981. []

Cadets must be between 18 and 27 years of age and have at least a sixth-grade education. Enrollment currently stands at about 180, and graduating classes average 22. Approximately 450 cadets have graduated since 1960. [] 25X1

Senior lieutenants and junior captains may take post-Academy courses at the Officers Training School, also located in Tegucigalpa. In addition, an Armed Forces Staff College, modeled on the US Army Command and General Staff School and intended primarily for Army majors, opened last July. []

Air Force cadets receive their training in the flight school, which is currently located in Tegucigalpa but is scheduled to be transferred, perhaps as early as next year, to a new air base being constructed at Comayagua. Theoretically, a class of approximately 15 cadets should graduate every 18 months. The training schedule, however, often slips—sometimes by as much as a year—because the poor condition of training aircraft and high fuel costs limit flying time. []

A few naval officers are graduates of the US Naval Academy, but most are drawn from the Army. Limited shore-based training is conducted at Puerto Cortes; there is no training at sea due to the small number of operational ships available. []

Several foreign countries have provided training assistance to Honduras. Many Honduran officers have taken courses in the United States or at the School of the Americas in Panama, and US personnel currently are giving helicopter flight instruction to Honduran pilots in Honduras. [] 25X1

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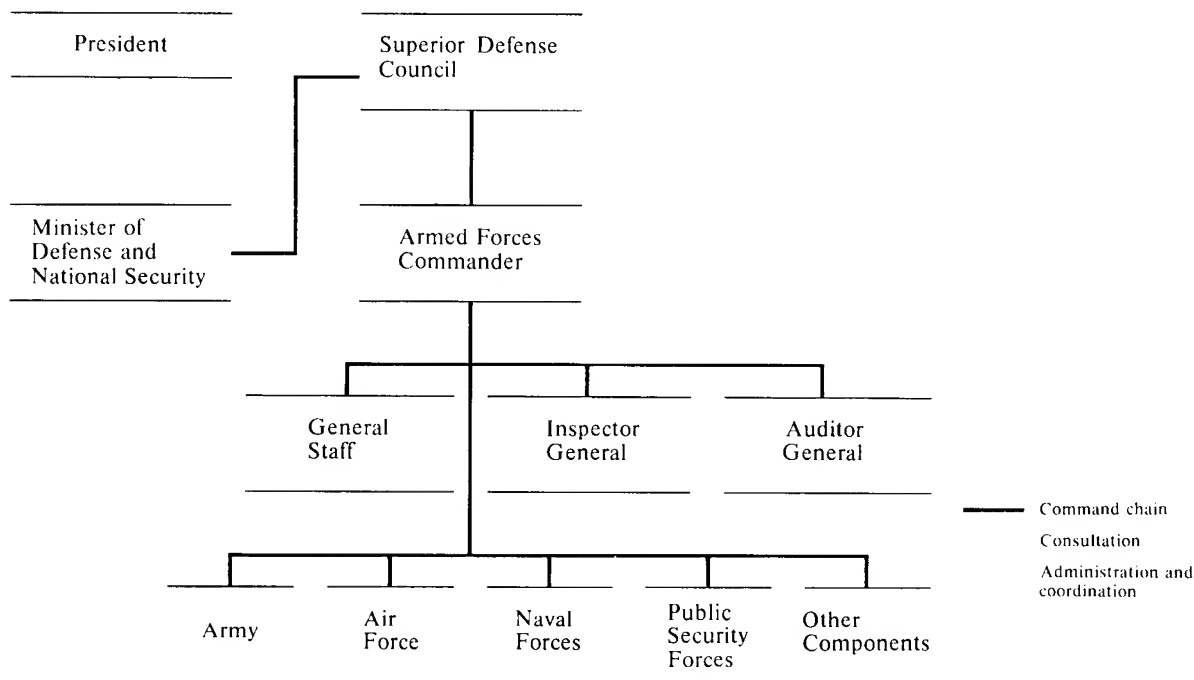
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Honduras: Chain of Command


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Chile is offering 10 to 20 scholarships to military academies for next year, and the Argentine military also intends to provide further study opportunities. In addition, three Honduran colonels attended a course on psychological warfare in Taiwan earlier this year.

Chain of Command

Constitutionally, the new civilian President will command the armed forces. In practice, he will have to defer to the Superior Defense Council on matters relating to defense and national security. Even in nonmilitary affairs, the President will need to consult with the Council and operate within limits set by the military.

As the collegial decisionmaking body for the officer corps, the Superior Defense Council is the main political force in Honduras; on two occasions—in 1975 and 1978—it has removed officers from the national presidency and chosen their successors. Established during the 1970s to provide guidance to the military government, the Council has approximately 37 members, including the Armed Forces Commander, the Defense Minister, the service chiefs, members of the General Staff, battalion and air base commanders, and directors of service schools. The Council meets on an irregular basis to consider political as well as military matters.

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The General Staff's role is basically administrative, since the Armed Forces Commander issues orders directly to the 15 battalion commanders (see chart). The country is divided into 10 military regions, each under a battalion commander designated as regional chief. Top command positions are rotated frequently, usually after the annual promotion list has been issued.

Equipment

The basic infantry weapons are 9,500 FAL, 2,000 M-16, and 1,000 Galil assault rifles, plus an additional 800 miscellaneous rifles. The weapons inventory also includes:

- Sixteen new British Scorpion light tanks.
- Twelve Israeli RBY armored reconnaissance vehicles.
- Approximately 280 trucks.
- Eight obsolescent 105-mm howitzers.
- Four 75-mm pack howitzers.
- Sixteen 106-mm recoilless rifles mounted on RBYs or quarter-ton trucks.
- Thirty-two antiaircraft guns.
- One hundred six 160-mm, 120-mm, and 81-mm mortars.
- Four US .50-caliber machineguns and an unknown number of Belgian MAG-58 machineguns.
- Two hundred Uzi submachineguns.

The Air Force has:

- One B-26 bomber, with little combat capability.
- Fifteen Super Mystere jet fighters.
- Eight F-86E and two F-86K jet fighters, all obsolete.
- Five A-37B jet trainer/fighters. 25X1
- Two medium transports.
- Twenty light transports.
- Five UH-1B helicopters (another four have been purchased but not yet delivered) and one executive helicopter.
- Ten UH-1H helicopters on lease from the United States.
- Twenty-eight trainer/utility aircraft.

The Navy has:

- Three 105-foot patrol boats. 25X1
- Five 65-foot patrol boats.
- Six obsolete medium landing craft.
- One 52-foot sounding boat.

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